

Berlusconi's Foreign Policy: Inverting Traditional Priorities

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For more than fifty years, from the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949 to the victory of Silvio Berlusconi in the 2001 national elections, Italy pursued, with variations dictated by circumstances, a foreign policy inspired by three essentials: enthusiastic adhesion to the objective of European union, a solid relationship with the United States, and a privileged relationship with the Arab countries of the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

There were times in which it was not easy to reconcile friendship with the United States with loyalty to Europe. Some decisions in crucial sectors of defence and the economy (aeronautics for example) went more frequently in the direction of the United States than Europe. Italy generally preferred relations with Lockheed and Boeing to those with Dassault or EADS (European Aeronautic Defence and Space company, Toulouse, producer of the Airbus). But when decisions that were disagreeable to Washington were required (space policy, Galileo, the many trade disputes of the last decade), Italy was impeccably European. It was equally difficult, at certain times, to reconcile the friendship with the Arab countries and the sympathy for the Palestinian cause with acknowledgement of Israel's position and its needs.

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One of the most difficult moments was during the Sigonella crisis,¹ after the hijacking of the Achille Laura off the coast of Egypt when then Prime Minister Bettino Craxi claimed, with a kind of poetic license, that Arafat could be considered a modern-day Mazzini, the revolutionary leader who fought for the unification of Italy. But Italy, with a few acrobatics, managed to avoid the reefs and steer the course. The man who was probably most able in this diplomatic exercise was Giulio Andreotti, above all in the years in which he was president of the Foreign Relations Committee of the House of Deputies and foreign minister.

Berlusconi's search for allies

With the advent of Berlusconi, the picture changed. In European and Atlantic relations the leader of *Forza Italia* (the main party of the centre-right coalition) showed little enthusiasm for the European Union and put relations with the United States at the top of his priorities. This was partially for personal reasons. When he became prime minister, Berlusconi was given the cold shoulder by many European governments, mainly centre-left at the time, and by almost all the major press on the continent. In the eyes of a considerable part of "liberal" Europe, he was a tycoon, with enormous press and television holdings, accused of fiscal fraud, false accounting, illegally siphoning of funds from his companies, corruption of magistrates and public officials. He had created a "company party", an unusual marketing operation in which he had involved his partners, his co-workers, his advertising and marketing experts. Had the boycott of Austria after the entry into the Schüssel government of Jörg Haider's national-liberal party not turned out to be a huge political *faux pas*, Berlusconi would probably have been subjected to the same reaction.

It was inevitable, in these conditions, that the leader of *Forza Italia* would seek support from government leaders less sensitive to the "ethical" campaigns of the centre-left. In the European Union, he received it from two prime ministers, Spanish Prime Minister José Maria Aznar and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who were ready to accept him as a travelling companion as long as his policies, above all on matters dealt with in Brussels, coincided with their national interests. Outside the Union, he found support from Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President George W. Bush. Berlusconi and Bush had some ideological affinity and shared a business past

¹ A. Silj, "The Gulf of Sidra Incident, March-April 1986", *The International Spectator*, vol. XXVIII, no. 1, 1993.

and a certain insensitivity to the moral aspects of conflicts of interests. They seemed to be made to get along.

It is not clear whether these personal relations corresponded to the the strategic choices of the Italian prime minister or whether they were rather the result of his personal conviction that an intimate relationship with important world leaders would confer greater international status on him and his country. Putin is an interesting case in point. For example, Berlusconi boasted of having engineered the agreement between NATO and Russia setting up the NATO-Russia Council signed at the Pratica di Mare summit in May 2002. But the agreement had probably already been reached during a previous meeting in Texas between Putin and Bush in November 2001. In the following months, during his meetings with the Russian leader, Berlusconi hinted at Russia's future entry into the European Union. Did he feel he could play the mediator in relations between Russia and the West? If those were his intentions, Berlusconi did not understand that Russia was not interested in becoming a part of the EU; what it wanted was to become a privileged partner of the Union and to reach agreements with Brussels on some important questions – but it was not willing to sacrifice its sovereignty and status as a Eurasian great power. In reality, Berlusconi's declarations were indicative of the way he conceived of European integration: a large economic zone that could expand as far as Vladivostok, relinquishing its original aspiration towards union. In the end, the European country that had a privileged relationship with Putin and profitted from it was not the Italy of Berlusconi, but the Germany of Gerhard Schröder which managed to increase its economic ties with Russia through a series of bilateral agreements.

The United States

Berlusconi's friendship with Bush was also mainly for purposes of image. Berlusconi probably thought that cordial personal relations with the American president would have made Italy the United States' privileged partner in Europe, alongside Great Britain. But when Bush decided to attack Iraq, at the beginning Berlusconi found himself in the same position as Tony Blair. If a country aspires to becoming the US' loyal friend, it cannot escape the duty of standing by it when it needs an ally. He probably decided to adopt the same line as the British, but the operation was only partially successful. The war triggered a wave of pacifism in the country, as well as the Pope's condemnation, the constitutional objections of the President of the Italian Republic and the latter's summoning of an extraordinary meeting of the Supreme Defence Council. Realising that the country was not about

to follow him down this path, Berlusconi decided Italy would participate only when the military operations had been terminated, presenting the mission as humanitarian assistance, thereby losing, to the benefit of Spain and Poland, some of the advantages he had hoped to receive from the conflict.

He regained some credit in Washington when the new prime minister of Spain, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, pulled out troops and Poland started to show signs of fatigue. But in the meantime, a new conflict had broken out in Iraq, much more insidious than the one the US had resolved in a couple of weeks during spring 2003. Although the Italian contingent in Nassiriya was a "peacekeeping force", it operated in the framework of an expeditionary contingent (UK) that was undoubtedly an occupying force. It was supposed to promote Italy's presence in the reconstruction of the country, but no reconstruction is possible when the occupying forces do not control the territory and workplaces can be threatened, sabotaged and attacked. The Italian troops tried to ensure the functioning of some public institutions and dedicated themselves to the training of Iraqi security personnel, but if security forces are considered "collaborationist" by those opposed to the occupation, training them is hardly considered a friendly activity.

When he realised that Italy's presence in Iraq had become a liability for Italy's foreign policy balancesheet, Berlusconi declared that he had never been in favour of the war and started to prepare for the Italian contingent's withdrawal. His only advantage in the months preceding the recent elections was that he was faced with an opposition in which the reformist component (the leaders of the *Democratici della Sinistra* [Democrats of the Left] and the *Margherita* [Daisy] parties) did not want to compromise the Prodi government's relations with the United States, in case of victory.

The European Union

The insistence with which Berlusconi cultivated personal relations with Bush, Aznar, Blair and Putin was an implicit confirmation of the lesser importance the government placed on European integration. Upon the suggestion of Gianni Agnelli, the owner of FIAT, Berlusconi had chosen Renato Ruggiero, an impeccable Europeanist, as his first foreign minister, but it immediately became evident that the prime minister would not support him nor defend his decisions. On the main questions of European integration, the government was lukewarm and sceptical, if not downright hostile.

When the time came to introduce the European arrest warrant into the Italian legal order, the anti-Europeanists of the government coalition (*Lega*

Nord [Northern League] and a part of *Alleanza Nazionale* [National Alliance]) began a more or less open opposition that was to last for several years. When Italy's participation in the construction of a large military transport plane (Airbus), a necessary component of any European rapid reaction force, was debated, the pro-US part of the government successfully pushed for Italy to withdraw from the consortium. When a journalist asked the Minister of Productive Activities what Italy's criteria were in choosing military procurements, he answered that choices were based on economic considerations – as if the price set by American companies when the United States is trying to win over a market and prevent others from doing so, is not political.

After Ruggiero's resignation in early 2002, Berlusconi avoided the embarrassment of a difficult replacement by taking on the post of foreign minister himself for more than a year. He promised an important reform, stating that the Italian Foreign Ministry would become an efficient instrument, alongside Italian industries, for winning new markets. But the operation would have called for a significant financial effort that was prohibitive for Italy's public finances and thus aborted.

His successor, Franco Frattini (*Forza Italia*), was a diligent Europeanist minister, who lacked personal political influence however and was forced to play the part of second in command, which he did with dignity. Paradoxically, the old Italian Europeanism was best represented by Gianfranco Fini (*Alleanza Nazionale*, a post-Fascist party), member of the European Convention on the Future of Europe and, later, foreign minister. Nevertheless, Italy's six-month presidency of the European Union in 2004 was a missed opportunity. It was evident that a European commitment was foreign to the culture and sensitivity of much of the coalition. Europe only counted for Berlusconi when it provided him with a stage, spotlights and television cameras, as happened during the signing of the Constitutional Treaty in Rome. As soon as he realised that Euro-scepticism had become popular, the prime minister started to make malicious comments about the euro and to blame the previous Prodi government (1996-98) for the negative effects that the single currency, according to Union critics, was having on the Italian economy.

Would a different European policy have been possible? It would be unfair to overlook that both France under Jacques Chirac and Germany under Gerhard Schröder were pursuing arrogant, national policies. The French-German axis stopped acting as the European locomotive, as it had been defined in the preceding decades, and became the instrument with which the two major European countries agreed on realising their respective national interests. Even on Iraq, Chirac and Schröder made no attempt to give their choices a European dimension. If Italy had denounced this policy,

it might have become the leader of a Europeanist group. But on the other hand, it would not have been able to count on either Aznar's Spain or Blair's UK, nor a number of other countries that considered Berlusconi, no matter what he did, an intolerable anomaly.

The Mediterranean and the Middle East

In the Mediterranean and the Middle East, the Berlusconi government did not give up its relations with Arab countries and tried in some cases to improve them. Agreements with North African states on emigration, Berlusconi's meeting with Qaddafi (10 February 2004) and the foreign minister's relations with the Libyan government can be set in the tradition of Italian foreign policy. There is a European framework (the Barcelona process) in which Italy has an interest in doing its part, and there is an entrenched pro-Arab thrust in the Foreign Ministry that continues to operate independently, without waiting for government input. Nevertheless, the Berlusconi government's support for the government in Jerusalem has been almost total in these years. There are probably two reasons for this and they deserve some further consideration.

First, the government's choice to support Israel is in many respects a spillover of its pro-US stance. In agreeing with Bush's theory that the fight against terrorism called for the destruction of Saddam's regime and that security in the Middle East depended on democratic transformation of the regimes there, the Berlusconi government found it natural to become an ally of the Israeli government. The error lay in not realising that the Baath regime in Baghdad was, with all its faults, a bulwark against the spread of Islamic fundamentalism and the policy of the Israeli government objectively an obstacle to the democratisation of the region. Israel is a vital democracy, but it is democratic in the same way that the great Western democracies were up to the end of decolonialisation. They were democratic at home where, while resorting to some manipulation and discrimination, they would not have dared publicly and explicitly violate the sacred principles of freedom and equality. But they were unscrupulously authoritarian in their colonies every time they felt that the freedom of their subjects and their demands for independence threatened the security of the metropolis. The Berlusconi government did its best to reconcile its new relations with Israel with its traditional friendship with the Arab countries. But its adherence to Israeli policy, after the failure of the Oslo accords, considerably limited the room for manoeuvre of its Middle Eastern policy.

The second reason for the Berlusconi government pro-Israeli position was the same one that led the Italian prime minister, not well liked by

socialdemocrat and progressive Europe, to seek friendship with Bush. Together with his main ally, Gianfranco Fini, Berlusconi felt that friendship with Israel and the Jewish communities, on both sides of the Atlantic, would contribute to neutralising the criticism of liberal opinion in Europe and the United States. Fini's trip to Tel Aviv and the award conferred on the Italian prime minister by an important US Jewish association did silence many critiques and reservations. But that trip and that award were in many respects the price that Italian foreign policy paid for the vulnerability of the Berlusconi government to international criticism.

Conclusion

To conclude, Berlusconi is the first prime minister, after the important choices of the forties and fifties, to have changed the order of the traditional priorities of Italian foreign policy. He had the right to do so – when they come to power with a respectable majority, a leader and coalition can certainly rethink and change the course of foreign policy of their predecessors. It does not seem, however, that the new course of the Berlusconi government corresponded to the expectations and hopes of its leader.